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Receivership in Lawrence, MA: Problems, Possibilities, and Progress

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Introduction

Massachusetts is this country's top-performing state. According to the 2012 PISA results, if Massachusetts were separated from the United States, it would place ninth in math proficiency and fourth in reading proficiency in the world (Crotty, 2014).

Such success, however, has eluded schools in many of Massachusetts's post-industrial towns such as Lawrence. In 2010, students in Lawrence Public Schools (LPS) ranked in the bottom one percent on the state's annual tests; the district's proficiency rates averaged 28 and 29 percentages points lower than the state's on the Massachusetts Comprehensive Assessment System (MCAS) in Math and English Language Arts (ELA), respectively.[1] The district's underperformance had been chronic: in 2010 student achievement was declining in three-quarters of the twenty-eight schools, and graduation rates hovered at 31 percentage points below the state's average. Almost a quarter of ninth graders failed to move to the 10th grade (LPS Turnaround Plan, 2012).

The tipping point came in 2010 when the district's superintendent was indicted for corruption, and the district's financial disarray became public (Stergio, 2010). After reviewing the records, state education commissioner Mitchell Chester placed the Lawrence school district in receivership and appointed Jeffrey Riley as receiver (New York Times, 2015). Under the receivership, the entire governing capacity of the district rested upon Riley and his position.

Portfolio Management Models

When state departments of education intervene in low-performing districts, they usually adopt variations of the portfolio management model (PMM) (Schueler et al., 2016). Louisiana and Tennessee, for instance, used the PMM in New Orleans and Memphis. In both cases, the state decoupled the district from geographic boundaries and recruited charter operators to turn around low-performing schools. The role of charter operators differed: New Orleans became a comprehensive charter system in which most of the district's schools had been started *ex nihilo*, whereas Memphis used charter management organizations to turn around low-performing schools, not to build new school cultures from the ground up. Tennessee thus relied upon the existing public school system to a much greater degree than had Louisiana (Kim et al., 2015; Glazer et al., 2015).

How have students fared under these two interventions? The evidence from New Orleans suggests some positive gains against a very low starting point; despite increasing their End of Course Index

[1] On MCAS, "proficiency" requires scores between 240-259.

(EOC)[2] scores by 34 percentage points between 2009 and 2014, New Orleans' students still ranked near the bottom in the state (Sims & Rossmeier, 2015). The evidence from Tennessee is slimmer still: while overall results in targeted schools improved, many effects remained statistically insignificant (Zimmer et al., 2015). The lack of uplift may be due to the relative newness of the Tennessee intervention, now in its 4th year of implementation, not to the robustness of the intervention *per se*.

How transportable are these two examples to other contexts? This is unclear. While urban school districts share common challenges such as high levels of poverty, racial tensions, and low student achievement, the governance appropriate to each context is unique (Malkus & English, 2015). Certainly, the devastation of Hurricane Katrina in 2005 offered not only the possibility, but also the necessity, of re-thinking New Orleans's school system from the ground up. The Massachusetts model suggests another way forward.

The Massachusetts Receivership

In a 2015 *Politico* article, Jeffrey Riley suggested that Lawrence's approach to turnaround school reform represented "a third way of doing business" (Bakeman, 2015). He likened the receivership to an architectural plan in which the district established common standards, while school leaders were given flexibility to fit those standards to their students' needs – a rejection of the one-size-fits-all structure that had been in place in Lawrence previously (LPS Turnaround and Architecture Model, 2015).

Massachusetts had granted Riley broad powers, including the authority to "charterize" the LPS if he deemed it necessary. The dynamics of the district were such that Riley and his team adopted their own hybrid portfolio model, while still relying on lessons learned from other states (Stergio, 2015). For instance, they brought two well-established charter operators into the district - Community Day and UP Education Network – to serve as contractors rather than as independent operators. These operators provided instructional support and managerial expertise for low-performing schools (Vasniz, 2012).

Additionally, Riley designed the receivership so that central control would diminish as schools improved. For example, because of its proven history, UP Education Network was given autonomy in staffing, scheduling, and choosing curricula in UP Leonard, a turnaround school. By contrast, Tarbox Elementary, a Level 3 school with declining scores prior to the state receivership, received ongoing central office support and oversight.

Critically, Riley abrogated components of the collective bargaining agreement that he deemed deleterious to student learning. He added performance-based teacher compensation, a longer school day and year, robust teacher and principal evaluation protocols, and school leaders' capacity to fire underperforming teachers without regard for seniority (Gunn, 2013).

Challenges

The receivership faced numerous challenges. LPS had been characterized by a culture of low

[2] The EOC Index is comprised of scores in six subjects.

expectations. School leadership and staff had become habituated to persistently low student achievement. LPS also includes a large Hispanic student population of which 80% were learning English as a second language. The teachers union resisted change; many parents felt disenfranchised; the larger Lawrence community itself had grown pessimistic in the face of the school system's fiscal irresponsibility and lackluster results. A final challenge was budgetary: Riley and his team faced financial constraints that were remedied only slightly under RTTT funding. Given these factors, Riley's priority was to build a community *ethos* around education based on high expectations and hope.

Strategic Plan

In May 2012 Riley presented a district turnaround plan that he characterized as a transformative partnership between teachers, administrators, and parents (Riley & Chester, 2012; LPS Turnaround Plan, 2012). The plan set out four strategies for turning LPS into a high-performing system of schools: (1) using data for ongoing formative assessments; (2) establishing a high-quality cohort of teachers and staff; (3) increasing student supports such as social-emotional interventions, targeted academic needs, and special education; and (4) creating systems that developed school autonomy side by side with school accountability (Riley & Chester, 2012, 2015).

During Phase I (2012-13), Riley and his team dismissed 160 teachers with unsatisfactory reviews and launched a campaign to attract teachers from Teach for America and successful charter schools. Phase I also included financial inducements to keep strong teachers in the district, such as the performance-based Teacher Leader Residency award. Riley also secured additional resources to improve student supports, including socio-emotional assistance for English Language Learners and special education students. During this phase, Riley built a central team to lead the Office of School Improvement and re-wrote huge swaths of the collective bargaining agreement (without negotiation).

During Phase II (2013-2015), Riley developed centralized accountability systems and a process to tie school autonomy to school improvement. Even as authority devolved to individual schools, however, the centralized system of accountability - comprised of measures for school performance, teacher evaluation frameworks, and school performance plans reviewed and approved by the receiver – stayed in place. Riley thus empowered school leaders to make decisions for their schools while holding these leaders accountable for their choices through a centralized data collection and management system.

During the third phase (current and ongoing), the state reviews progress against the school and district benchmarks set at the outset of the receivership. The outcomes of interest are closing the statewide achievement gap in ELA and math, improving graduation rates, and moving LPS into the top five "gateway city districts" in Massachusetts (from twenty-second of the twenty-four) in all three metrics over a several-year period. As schools reach these benchmarks, the receiver's role is meant to shift from overseeing district operations to supporting and monitoring schools within the newly established accountability system. In May 2015, the state and the receivership renewed the strategic plan, noting LPS achievements to date.

Results

The Massachusetts receivership has yielded positive academic outcomes so far. Six schools are

now identified as high performing, up from two in 2010 (Schuler et al., 2016). The *LPS District Report* (Riley & Chester, 2012, 2015) and *Back from the Brink* (2015) showed:

- Increases in student growth percentiles on English and mathematics MCAS;
- Increases in students' absolute test scores - up 9 percentage points in English and 17 points in math;
- Historic levels in math proficiency, with a 13 percentage point increase since 2012;
- Increases in graduation rates from 52% in 2011, to 67% in 2015; and
- A decline in dropout rates, from 9% in 2011 to 4.5% in 2014.

These results are, by any account, remarkable. Coupling strong central leadership with principal-level autonomy shows promise in Lawrence. It is early days yet, but other states and districts are watching: a year ago, the New York State Board of Regents asked the state education department to conduct research on the Massachusetts model and its success (Tan, 2015). As the debate continues about interventions that might help low-performing schools, the Lawrence receivership may prove a viable policy solution in urban districts well beyond Massachusetts.

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